WILEY

Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept

Author(s): ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON

Source: *Hypatia*, SUMMER 2011, Vol. 26, No. 3, Ethics of Embodiment (SUMMER 2011), pp. 591-609

Published by: Wiley on behalf of Hypatia, Inc.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016570

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

and *Wiley* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hypatia*

JSTOR

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept

ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON

This article offers the critical concept misfit *in an effort to further think through the lived identity and experience of disability as it is situated in place and time. The idea of a misfit and the situation of misfitting that I offer here elaborate a materialist feminist understanding of disability by extending a consideration of how the particularities of embodiment interact with the environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects. The interrelated dynamics of fitting and misfitting constitute a particular aspect of world-making involved in material-discursive becoming. The essay makes three arguments: the concept of misfit emphasizes the particularity of varying lived embodiments and avoids a theoretical generic disabled body; the concept of misfit clarifies the current feminist critical conversation about universal vulnerability and dependence; the concept of misfitting as a shifting spatial and perpetually temporal relationship confers agency and value on disabled subjects.*

This article offers the critical concept *misfit* in an effort to further think through the lived identity and experience of disability as it is situated in place and time. Arguments from both feminist and non-feminist theorists have attempted to shift prevalent traditional understandings of disability as lack, excess, or flaw located in bodies to a relational conceptualization of disability as a social construction whose meaning is determined primarily through discourse. Disability oppression in this view emanates from prejudicial attitudes that are given form in the world through architectural barriers, exclusionary institutions and the unequal distribution and access to resources.[1] Similar to the useful distinction between sex and gender proposed by early feminists such as Gayle Rubin (1975), the terms *impairment* and *disability* distinguish between bodily states or conditions taken to be impaired, and the social process of disablement that gives meaning and consequences to those impairments in the world.[2] Although

Hypatia vol. 26, no. 3 (Summer, 2011) © by Hypatia, Inc.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

such binaries have limits, shifting *disability* from an attributed problem in the body to a problem of social justice was theoretically groundbreaking. The term and concept *misfit* contributes to the work of more recent disability theorists, such as Jackie Leach Scully and Tobin Siebers, who develop accounts of embodied aspects of disability such as pain and functional limitation without giving up the claim to disability as a social phenomenon.[3]

The idea of a misfit and the situation of misfitting that I offer here elaborate a materialist feminist understanding of disability by extending a consideration of how the particularities of embodiment interact with their environment in its broadest sense, to include both its spatial and temporal aspects. This article, in other words, offers an account of a dynamic encounter between flesh and world. I will make three arguments throughout this paper about misfitting as I define the concept. First, the concept of misfit emphasizes the particularity of varying lived embodiments and avoids a theoretical generic disabled body that can dematerialize if social and architectural barriers no longer disable it. Second, the concept of misfit clarifies the current feminist critical conversation about universal vulnerability and dependence. Third, the concept of misfitting as a shifting spatial and perpetually temporal relationship confers agency and value on disabled subjects at risk of social devaluation by highlighting adaptability, resourcefulness, and subjugated knowledge as potential effects of misfitting.

What has come recently to be called material feminism provides conceptual language that expands the idea of the social construction of reality toward a material-discursive understanding of phenomena and matter. This corrective move shifts, according to Karen Barad, concepts such as Butlerian performativity toward the material and away from the linguistic-semiotic-interpretive turn in critical theory that tends to understand every "thing" as "a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation" (Barad 2008, 120). Material feminism emphasizes interactive dynamism—what Barad calls "intra-active becoming" (146). Such becoming understands the fundamental units of being not as words and things or subjects and objects, but as dynamic phenomena produced through entangled and shifting forms of agency inherent in all materiality. Misfitting as an explanatory concept lets us think through a particular aspect of world-making involved in material-discursive becoming.[4]

Fitting and Misfitting

I propose the term *misfit* as a new critical keyword that seeks to defamiliarize and to reframe dominant understandings of disability.[5] *Fitting* and *misfitting* denote an encounter in which two things come together in either harmony or disjunction. When the shape and substance of these two things correspond in their union, they fit. A *misfit*, conversely, describes an incongruent relationship

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

between two things: a square peg in a round hole. The problem with a misfit, then, inheres not in either of the two things but rather in their juxtaposition, the awkward attempt to fit them together. When the spatial and temporal context shifts, so does the fit, and with it meanings and consequences. Misfit emphasizes context over essence, relation over isolation, mediation over origination. Misfits are inherently unstable rather than fixed, yet they are very real because they are material rather than linguistic constructions. The discrepancy between body and world, between that which is expected and that which is, produces fits and misfits. The utility of the concept of misfit is that it definitively lodges injustice and discrimination in the materiality of the world more than in social attitudes or representational practices, even while it recognizes their mutually constituting entanglement.[6]

The theoretical utility of fitting and misfitting comes from its semantic and grammatical flexibility. Similar to many critical terms, *misfit* offers layered richness of meaning. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the verb *fit* denotes a relationship of spatial juxtaposition, meaning "to be of such size and shape as to fill exactly a given space, or conform properly to the contour of its receptacle or counterpart; to be adjusted or adjustable to a certain position." Moreover, the action of fitting involves a "proper" or "suitable" relationship with an environment so as to be "well adapted," "in harmony with," or "satisfy[ing] the requirements of" the specified situation. As an adjective, *fitting* means "agreeable to decorum, becoming, convenient, proper, right." *Fit* as an adjective also moves beyond simple suitability into a more value-laden connotation when it means "possessing the necessary qualifications, properly qualified, competent, deserving" and "in good "form" or condition." In British slang, *fit* even means "sexually attractive or good-looking." *Fit,* then, suggests a generally positive way of being and positioning based on an absence of conflict and a state of correct synchronization with one's circumstances.

Misfit, in contrast, indicates a jarring juxtaposition, an "inaccurate fit; (hence) unsuitability, disparity, inconsistency," according to the Oxford English Dictionary. *Misfit* offers grammatical flexibility by describing both the person who does not fit and the act of not fitting. The verb *misfit* applies to both things and people, meaning "to fail to fit, fit badly; to be unfitting or inappropriate." This condition of mis-fitting slides into the highly negative figure of a "person unsuited or ill-suited to his or her environment, work, etc.; *spec.* one set apart from or rejected by others for his or her conspicuously odd, unusual, or antisocial behaviour and attitudes." Thus, to mis-fit renders one a *misfit*. Moreover, ambiguity between *fit* and *misfit* is intimated in a less prevalent meaning of *fit* as a seizure disorder or in a more traditional sense as what the Oxford English Dictionary explains as a "paroxysm, or one of the recurrent attacks, of a periodic or constitutional ailment. In later use also with wider sense: a sudden and somewhat severe but transitory attack (of illness, or of some specified ailment)."

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Misfitting serves to theorize disability as a way of being in an environment, as a material arrangement. A sustaining environment is a material context of received and built things ranging from accessibly designed built public spaces, welcoming natural surroundings, communication devices, tools, and implements, as well as other people. A fit occurs when a harmonious, proper interaction occurs between a particularly shaped and functioning body and an environment that sustains that body. A misfit occurs when the environment does not sustain the shape and function of the body that enters it. The dynamism between body and world that produces fits or misfits comes at the spatial and temporal points of encounter between dynamic but relatively stable bodies and environments. The built and arranged space through which we navigate our lives tends to offer fits to majority bodies and functioning and create misfits with minority forms of embodiment, such as people with disabilities. The point of civil rights legislation, and the resulting material practices such as universally designed built spaces and implements, is to enlarge the range of fits by accommodating the widest possible range of human variation.

People with disabilities have historically occupied positions as outcasts or misfits as, for example, in the roles of lepers, the mad, or cripples. One thinks of the iconic Oedipus: lame and blind, cast out on the road for his hubris, patricide, and incest. People with disabilities become misfits not just in terms of social attitudes—as in unfit for service or parenthood—but also in material ways. Their outcast status is literal when the shape and function of their bodies comes in conflict with the shape and stuff of the built world. The primary negative effect of misfitting is exclusion from the public sphere—a literal casting out—and the resulting segregation into domestic spaces or sheltered institutions. The disadvantage of disability comes partly from social oppression encoded in attitudes and practices, but it also comes from the built and arranged environment. Law or custom can and has produced segregation of certain groups; misfitting demonstrates how encounters between bodies and unsustaining environments also have produced segregation.

Misfit, then, reflects the shift in feminist theory from an emphasis on the discursive toward the material by centering its analytical focus on the coconstituting relationship between flesh and environment. The materiality that matters in this perspective involves the encounter between bodies with particular shapes and capabilities and the particular shape and structure of the world.

Misfitting contributes to this critical turn toward the material by attending to mutually constituting relationships among things in the world. Misfitting is a performance in Barad's and Judith Butler's sense, in that enacts agency and subjectivity. The performing agent in a misfit materializes not in herself but rather literally up against the thingness of the world. Misfitting focuses on the disjunctures that occur in the interactive dynamism of becoming. Performativity theory would rightly suggest, of course, that no smooth fit between body

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and world ever exists. Nonetheless, fitting and misfitting occur on a spectrum that creates consequences. To use the iconic disability access scene of misfitting as one illustration of those consequences: when a wheelchair user encounters a flight of stairs, she does not get into the building; when a wheelchair user encounters a working elevator, she enters the space. The built-ness or thing-ness of the space into which she either fits or misfits is the unyielding determinant of whether she enters, of whether she joins the community of those who fit into the space. Another iconic example of misfitting occurs when a deaf, sign-language user enters a hearing environment. Imagine, for instance, the extravagant full-body gesturing of the deaf signer misfitting into a boardroom full of executives seated in contained comportment with moving mouths and stilled bodies conferring on important decisions.

Fitting and misfitting are aspects of materialization, as Butler has used the term, that literally ground discursive constructivism in matter (Butler 1993). Fitting occurs when a generic body enters a generic world, a world conceptualized, designed, and built in anticipation of bodies considered in the dominant perspective as uniform, standard, majority bodies. In contrast, misfitting emphasizes particularity by focusing on the specific singularities of shape, size, and function of the person in question. Those singularities emerge and gain definition only through their unstable disjunctive encounter with an environment. The relational reciprocity between body and world materializes both, demanding in the process an attentiveness to the distinctive, dynamic thingness of each as they come together in time and space. In one moment and place there is a fit; in another moment and place a misfit. One citizen walks into a voting booth; another rolls across a curb cut; yet another bumps her wheels against a stair; someone passes fingers across the brailled elevator button; somebody else waits with a white cane before a voiceless ATM machine; some other blind user retrieves messages with a screen reader. Each meeting between subject and environment will be a fit or misfit depending on the choreography that plays out.

Fitting and misfitting extend the concept that shape carries story, an elegant phrase that I borrow from medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum (1999). In considering the philosophical question of continuity in human identity over time, Bynum draws from her personal experience of observing her father's long-term progressive dementia. Perhaps unknowingly, Bynum asks a disability theory question about how we can maintain a continuous sense of self as our bodies change over time. Her response expresses an inherent and mutually constitutive relationship between body and narrative, between nature and culture: "Shape carries story," Bynum concludes (1999).[7] In this formulation, embodiment—our particular "shape" in the broadest sense—is always dynamic as it interacts with world. As such, embodied life has a narrative, storied quality; the shifting of our shapes knits one moment to the next and one place to

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

another. Bynum's concept of shape carrying story introduces temporality into encounters between body and world, in a narrative that by definition connects moments in space into a coherent form we call story. The idea that shape carries story suggests, then, that material bodies are not only in the spaces of the world but that they are entwined with temporality as well.

Misfitting, Visibility, and Identity

A good enough fit produces material anonymity, a version of the visual anonymity I have elsewhere argued that staring relationships interrupt.[8] A reasonable fit in a reasonably sustaining environment allows a person to navigate the world in relative anonymity, in the sense of being suited to the circumstances and conditions of the environment, of satisfying its requirements in a way so as not to stand out, make a scene, or disrupt through countering expectations. Material anonymity describes a predominantly unmarked and unrecognized way of being in the world, a way that Harvey Sacks calls "doing being ordinary" (1984). Such a phenomenology yields the privilege or social capital conferred by accessing spaces, performing tasks, and establishing relations that enable one to exercise the rights of citizenship in democratic orders. Linda Martín Alcoff's 2006 account of identity formation, *Visible Identities*, corresponds with my concept of misfitting in that it is relational, experiential, and contingent. How we look, and look at each other, Alcoff insists, determines in large part how we make our way through the world and how we treat one another.[9] Like misfitting, Alcoff's version of identity formation as "a perceptual habit" (Alcoff 2006, 188) fuses a materialist with a constructivist theory of identity formation. As with fitting and misfitting, Alcoff's version of identity is discursive-material. That is, identity is at once performative and narrative, emerging as particular material bodies interact in particular social locations and moments. Identity, for Alcoff, does not reside in visible features but emerges from shared, dominant interpretations of "visual markers on the body" (6). This perception of identity is a "learned ability" that is context dependent, complex, and fluid (187). Alcoff suggests that we are called into subjectivity through an exchange of mutual recognition, which may of course often be misrecognition. Misfitting adds to this primarily perceptual field stronger elements of materiality; our bodies move, meet, negotiate, and come into direct contact with the built and natural worlds. The degree to which that shared material world sustains the particularities of our embodied life at any given moment or place determines our fit or misfit. Our particular embodiments are as unchosen as the narratives of our identities upon which Alcoff focuses. Identities are narratives accessed through visual perceptions for Alcoff; fitting and misfitting are largely tactical navigations through space and time. Both these visual and tactile relations make up the process of

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

identification both as it is imposed and felt. Both sets of relations turn on material particularity, the way we look and how we function. Frequently, we do not choose our particularities, but as Alcoff reminds us, the meaning and the substance of our bodies can be reshaped to some degree. The concepts of fitting and misfitting speak directly to the issue of reshaping body and world.

One of the fundamental premises of disability politics is that social justice and equal access should be achieved by changing the shape of the world, not changing the shape of our bodies. People with quadriplegia, for example, should be provided with sustaining environments that allow them to participate fully as equal citizens rather than urging them toward normalization through medical scientific cure. Deaf people, similarly, should not be made into hearing people through technology such as cochlear implants and high-tech hearing aids but rather should have access to communication with both the hearing and the deaf through sign language and other forms of nonverbal communication that create a fit between them and their world. Alcoff aims not to mute identity or reshape our bodies in order to achieve social justice, but rather to "make identities more visible" in order to transform their meanings so that they provide their bearers with a coherent and positive narrative of human particularity from which to launch subjective and political agency, a point to which I will return. Similarly, the formative experience of slamming against an unsustaining environment can unsettle our and others' occurrences of fitting. Like the dominant subject positions such as male, white, or heterosexual, fitting is a comfortable and unremarkable majority experience of material anonymity, an unmarked subject position that most of us occupy at some points in life and that often goes unnoticed. When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us. When we experience misfitting and recognize that disjuncture for its political potential, we expose the relational component and the fragility of fitting. Any of us can fit here today and misfit there tomorrow.

In this sense, the experience of misfitting can produce subjugated knowledges from which an oppositional consciousness and politicized identity might arise. So although misfitting can lead to segregation, exclusion from the rights of citizenship, and alienation from a majority community, it can also foster intense awareness of social injustice and the formation of a community of misfits that can collaborate to achieve a more liberatory politics and praxis. Indeed, much of the disability rights movement grew from solidarity born of misfitting. Even the canonical protest practices of disability rights, such as groups of wheelchair users throwing themselves out of chairs and crawling up the stairs of public buildings, act out a misfitting.[10] So whereas the benefit of fitting is material and visual anonymity, the cost of fitting is perhaps complacency about social justice and a desensitizing to material experience. Misfitting, I would argue, ignites a vivid recognition of our fleshliness and the contingencies of

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

human embodiment. Misfitting, then, informs disability experience and is crucial to disability identity formation. The dominant cultural story of proper human development is to fit into the world and depends upon a claim that our shapes are stable, predictable, and manageable. One of the hallmarks of modernity is the effort to control and standardize human bodies and to bestow status and value accordingly.[11] Our bodies and our stories about them reach toward tractable states called *normal* in medical-scientific discourses, *average* in consumer capitalism, *ordinary* in colloquial idiom, and *progressive* in developmental accounts.[12]

Misfitting, Dependence, and Vulnerability

The concept of misfitting allows identity theory to consider the particularities of embodiment because it does not rely on generic figures delineated by identity categories. The encounters between body and environment that make up misfitting are dynamic. Every body is in perpetual transformation not only in itself but also in its location within a constantly shifting environment. So who one is and what that means is fluid as well. The material particularity of encounter determines both meaning and outcome.

Although *misfit* is associated with disability and arises from disability theory, its critical application extends beyond disability as a cultural category and social identity toward a universalizing of misfitting as a contingent and fundamental fact of human embodiment. In this way, the concept of misfitting can enter the critical conversation on embodiment that involves the issues of contingency and instability. These concepts have been thoughtfully elaborated recently within feminist theory under the terms *dependence* and *vulnerability*. Such concepts allow us to put embodied life at the center of our understanding of sociopolitical relations and structures, subject formation, felt and ascribed identities, interpersonal relations, and bioethics. Conceptualizing human subjects as embodied ensures a materialist analysis that accounts for human particularity. Focusing on the contingency of embodiment avoids the abstraction of persons into generic, autonomous subjects of liberal individualism, what legal theorist Martha Albertson Fineman calls one of the foundational myths of Western culture (Fineman 2005; 2008). The concepts of misfitting and fitting guarantee that we recognize that bodies are always situated in and dependent upon environments through which they materialize as fitting or misfitting.

Vulnerability is a way to describe the potential for misfitting to which all human beings are subject. The flux inherent in the fitting relation underscores that vulnerability lies not simply in our neediness and fragility but in how and whether that vulnerable flesh is sustained.[13] The elaboration of dependency and vulnerability developed by Fineman can illuminate the misfitting relationship. In her 2005 book *The Autonomy Myth* and her more recent work on

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

vulnerability theory, Fineman argues that the fact of embodiment creates universal vulnerability and defines dependency as the need in all human beings for care. Although the ethics of care has been a concern in feminist theory for a number of years, Fineman moves the conversation toward politics and law by arguing for collective responsibility for dependency and mitigating the social injustice caused by the disavowal and denial of dependency.[14] The reciprocal nature of care and the denial of that truth by the dominant liberal order leads Fineman to call for state responsibility for care and protection from inherent human vulnerability. What makes us vulnerable to what I'm calling misfitting is, according to Fineman, not only the fact of our embodiment but also the stigmatization and devaluing of the care-giving relationship in traditional liberal orders.[15]

Fineman's emphasis on the fact of our need for care from others underscores the relational aspect of embodiment as a way to expose the myth of autonomy. Butler, in her book *Precarious Life* (2004), also founds sociopolitical justice in the fact of bodily vulnerability. Whereas Fineman emphasizes our shared need for reciprocal bodily care as the stress point where vulnerability occurs, Butler finds human attachment to be the source of our fundamental vulnerability. Although Butler acknowledges interdependency as crucial to our humanness, she sees the common condition of our injurability as our bond to one another. A sustaining fit for Butler would consist of the emotional presence of beloved others, which is always haunted by human mortality and the specter of our evanescence. That our body needs resources and attending to is more Fineman's concern, whereas Butler sees us as vulnerable to the loss of the other, to grief in the sundering of emotive bonds inherent in our bodily fragility. Fineman's vulnerability lies in the fact that we all need to eat, be sheltered, and be comforted; Butler's vulnerability lies in the fact that we must grieve and die. Aloneness seems the ultimate misfit for Butler.

Like Fineman and Butler, sociologist Brian S. Turner understands embodiment as the source of our common vulnerability. In his 2006 book *Vulnerability and Human Rights*, Turner adds a focus on human rights and particularity that corresponds with my theory of misfitting. The inevitable contingency of human existence is the basis of human rights for Turner. The self is neither abstract nor autonomous. It grows from a body in a particular social and material location. The abuse of human rights destroys the conditions that make what Turner calls our "embodiment, enselfment, and emplacement" possible (Turner 2006, 27). Similar to Butler, Turner sees our bond as being our shared capacity for suffering. Like Butler, what Turner understands as ontological contingency is the fragility of the material body, its vulnerability to wounding, injury, pain, suffering, dying. The concept of rights accorded equally to all humans regardless of their particularity that Turner finds central to his theory is exemplified in the first comprehensive human

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

rights treaty of the twenty-first century, which is the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol, adopted in December 2006. This wide-ranging treaty conceptualizes embodiment as unstable and disability as contextual and takes us some of the way to a theory of misfitting: "Disability," the preamble to the treaty states, "is an evolving concept and disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." The treaty's language implies that the misfit between "persons with impairments" and an unsustaining environment made up of "barriers" materializes our inherent vulnerability.

The relational and contingent quality of misfitting and fitting, then, places vulnerability in the fit, not in the body. This concept also accounts for the problem of differential vulnerability, of apparent sturdiness in some and fragility in others. Vulnerability is universally inherent—as Fineman, Butler, and Turner insist—but it is a potentiality that is realized when bodies encounter a hostile environment and is latent in a sustaining environment. Fineman rightly suggests that the "quality and quantity of resources we possess or can command" depend upon our social position and determine in large part the particular form in which our vulnerability is realized (Fineman 2008, 27). To fit and be fit, I have suggested, is to be ensconced in an environment that sustains the particular form, function, and needs of one's body. Although resources and privilege certainly mitigate misfits, the relationship between body and world is rangier than this. A misfit occurs when world fails flesh in the environment one encounters—whether it is a flight of stairs, a boardroom full of misogynists, an illness or injury, a whites-only country club, subzero temperatures, or a natural disaster.

A theory of fitting and misfitting includes, then, the premise of universal vulnerability, but it has the virtue of expanding the conversation from the threat of what Fineman calls "the ever-present possibility of harm, injury, and misfortune from mildly adverse to catastrophically devastating events" (Fineman 2008, 25). Our enfleshment certainly makes us mortal, open to loss, and exposed to suffering. But our bodies are also the agents of our lived experience and subjectivity. An embodied engagement with world is in fact life itself.

Bioethics, Agency, and Misfits

A bioethics of social justice inheres in the concept of misfitting. Misfits can exceed the experiences of oppression and subordination and lead to a demand for and recognition of better fits. Disability and other equal rights movements work toward building a sustaining environment that offers fits where misfits

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

have occurred. To misfit into the public sphere is to be denied full citizenship. The aspirational goal of creating a universally sustaining environment would provide equal access to a democratic public sphere comprised of open integrated institutions such as the workplace, marketplace, media, transportation facilities, and public institutions such as schools, health-care centers, archives, and governmental spaces. This public sphere is the space in which citizenship is enacted and in which democratic intercourse among citizens occurs.[16] Siebers argues that "political membership relies on the ideology of ability" (Siebers 2008, 179). This ideology of ability produces a world into which people with the embodied particularities we think of as disability do not fit. Access to civil and human rights becomes, then, a proper fit.

As I suggested, the individual and collective experience of misfitting can produce the subjugated knowledge, outsider/insider standpoint, or privileged epistemic state from which one could launch a liberatory identity politics of the kind suggested by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) or Alcoff (2006). The mediation of experience through theory that critics such as Satya Mohanty (2000) call for occurs materially in misfitting, creating the potential for a politicized consciousness, an epistemic epiphany regarding the relativity of exclusions that the status quo explains as natural or essentializes as inherent inferiority. For example, a white cane or a brailled book is an element of the sustaining environment for a blind person to encounter a fit that accommodates the minority embodiment of blindness in an environment built for the sighted. Such prostheses ease the material divergences between bodies and their locations, making misfits into fits.

Misfitting can materialize identity as an epistemically privileged political position from which a progressive politics might arise. The form, function, comportment, and sensory modes of human bodies inform the ways we interact with human, built, and natural environments. This interaction between self and world can produce politically liberatory, material effects. Such "epistemic significance" Cherríe Moraga calls "theory in the flesh" (quoted in Moya 2000, 91). In other words, the experience of misfitting, if it is theoretically mediated, structures the narrative aspect of identity and is structured by the material world. Misfitting has explanatory power to produce a coherent narrative of how inferiority is assigned and literal marginalization takes place. Realist identity theory proposes a materially located subject whose narrative of both particular and communal self—whose "epistemic privilege"—arises from the misfit between what Alcoff calls one's "first person and third person selves," or what sociologists call one's achieved and ascribed identities (Alcoff 2000, 337). Such politicized potential results from the dissonance between what I call felt and attributed identity, the jolt of what W. E. B. Dubois terms "double consciousness" (Dubois 2008, 6). Misfit moves this idea of dissonance from epistemology into phenomenology.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

By framing the materialization of identity and subjectivity as perpetual, complex encounters between embodied variation and environments, fitting and misfitting can help reconceptualize the reigning notion of "oppression," with its suggestion of individually enforced, hierarchically structured subjugation. Misfit does so by stressing the relational rather than the essential, insisting that reality is a product of contextual relations rather than stable, atomistic essences. The utility of the concept of misfit is that it definitively lodges injustice and discrimination in the materiality of the world rather than predominantly in social attitudes. Misfitting operates independently of oppressive agents or even groups who might exercise active antipathy or discrimination. A wheelchair user, for instance, might be socially accepted in a workplace, but if the only way to get to the office is via stairs, a wheelchair user will not have access to the economic benefits a stair climber has. Similarly, a blind person is disadvantaged in a world that demands reading printed text in order to fully participate in the public sphere. A person with dwarfism is excluded primarily because she must navigate a world whose scale is wrong for her body. And someone whose body does not fit the configuration of a keyboard will not turn out text in the same way that ten nimble fingers produce. In other words, inequality occurs not purely from prejudicial attitudes but is an artifact of material configurations misfitting with bodies. This is of course not exclusive to disability discrimination; what we commonly call institutional racism functions similarly. Nevertheless, the experience of disability highlights the disparity between the physical realities of our lives, between the ways our bodies function and are formed and the ways the world is built for certain kinds of bodies.

A Bioethics of Resourcefulness

The most pressing question for a feminist materialist disability theory is developing an argument for why disabled people should be in the world—not only in the public sphere, but in our shared world. While civil and human rights initiatives worldwide strive to integrate people with disabilities and to provide access to those rights, at the same time advanced technologies such as medical normalization and pre- and post-embryonic eugenic selections work toward eliminating the particularities of embodiment we think of as disability. Misfits who fall into varied devalued social categories have been purged through forms of eugenic eradication such as the European Holocaust, American lynching, the prison-industrial complex, and coercive heteronormativity.

This paradoxical but virulent cultural mandate to expunge disability has been countered over the last thirty years by civil and human rights initiatives such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and other similar national

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

legislation. The misfitting that would exclude people with disabilities from the world is also countered by the kind of positive identity politics in a postpositive realist theory of identity such as Alcoff formulates. By positive identity politics, I am not suggesting reductive or essentialist dogma such as refusing to surgically treat cleft palates or mitigate pain, or holding candlelight vigils in praise of breast cancer. Rather, I mean an identity politics that would reimagine disability as human variation, a form of human biodiversity that we want to recognize and accept, even embrace, in a democratic order.[17] In arguing for a disability bioethics, Scully advocates what I would call an ethical fitting enabled by reconstructing narratives that revalue the particularities we think of as impairment and deviance to bring forward "information or strategies that disabled people need to survive and flourish that are missing from existing accounts" (Scully 2008, 128). Misfits are the agents of these strategies through the process of misfitting.

Misfits can also be agents of recognition who by the very act of misfitting engage in challenging and rearranging environments to accommodate their entrance to and participation in public life as equal citizens. Attending to the dynamics of misfitting and fitting urges us to cultivate the rich particularity that makes up embodied human diversity. Although modernity presses us relentlessly toward corporeal and other forms of standardization, the human body in fact varies greatly in its forms and functions. Our experience of living eventually contradicts our collective fantasy that the body is stable, predictable, or controllable, creating misfits for all of us. What we call disability is unavoidable, insistent in its misfitting. Our conventional response to disability is to change the person through medical technology, rather than changing the environment to accommodate the widest possible range of human form and function. The concept of misfitting shifts this model. The body is dynamic, constantly interacting with history and environment; sometimes it fits and at other points or moments, it does not. We evolve into what we call disability as our lives develop. The misfits that constitute the lived experience of disability in its broadest sense is perhaps, then, the essential characteristic of being human.

Rather than extirpating disability to achieve fits in the world, we should attend to processes of fitting and misfitting to which we are all vulnerable in the interest of accommodating and ultimately valuing disability in its broadest sense as a form of human variation. First of several reasons is that we might see disability not as anomalous but as a significant universal human experience that occurs in every society, every family, and most every life. Second, we might accept that fact. Third, we might better approach social justice by integrating disability into our knowledge of human experience and history and integrating disabled people into our societies. Fourth, we might more fully recognize interdependence rather than independence by becoming more aware that all people rely on one another for life tasks and survival. Fifth, we might

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

expand toward intrinsic rather than instrumental valuing of human beings, which is the foundational principle of egalitarian political culture. Sixth, we might communally develop what Scully calls "the particular moral understandings that are generated through the experience of impairment" (Scully 2008, 9).

Let me linger on a final reason why disability misfits should be in the world. The moral understandings, subjugated knowledge, or ethical fitting that can emerge from what might be called socially conscious, or even theoretically mediated, misfitting can yield innovative perspectives and skills in adapting to changing and challenging environments. Acquiring or being born with the traits we call disabilities fosters an adaptability and resourcefulness that often is underdeveloped in those whose bodies fit smoothly into the prevailing, sustaining environment. This epistemic status fosters a resourcefulness that can extend to the nondisabled and not yet disabled as they relate to and live with people with disabilities.[18] For example, people born without arms all learn to use their toes to accomplish tasks that those of us with arms never are able to do. Blind people learn to navigate through the world without the aid of light, a skill useful when sources of artificial light that seeing people depend upon fail. Deaf people develop modes of communication that are silent. Such misfitting can be generative rather than necessarily catastrophic for human beings. For example, Claude Monet painted more impressionistically as he became blind. The artist Chuck Close evolved a distinctive style of realism in response to paralysis. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas recently wrote that the experience of having a cleft palate and the accompanying multiple surgeries positively shaped his intellectual development (Habermas 2004).

The resourcefulness and adaptability that can emerge from the interactive dynamism between world and body I've named here as misfitting answers Wendy Brown's proposal that our politics should not focus on what we are but what we want (Brown 1993). To get what we want, it is not necessary to sacrifice identity or identity politics as Brown suggests, to frame identity as a "wounded attachment." The critical concept of misfitting emphasizes location rather than being, the relational rather than the essential. Understanding identity as a set of variable fits and misfits, a potentially productive fusion of coincidence and disparity between one's particularity and the material status quo, provides a way to convert being to wanting without neutralizing identity. These instances of resourcefulness arising from misfits are not "wounded attachments" nor is this a politics of resentment; this is the productive power of misfitting.

Notes

1. See, for example, Davis 1995; Wendell 1996; Thomas 1999. For an overview of these arguments, see Barnes, Barton, and Oliver 2002.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

2. See, for example, Linton 1998.

3. See Scully 2008 and Siebers 2008. Also see Clare 1999; Mitchell and Snyder 2006; Schweik 2009.

4. Material feminism has emerged from the work of theorists such as Sandra Harding (1986), Elizabeth Grosz (1994), Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), Evelyn Fox Keller (2002), Donna Haraway (2003), Elizabeth Wilson (2004), Karen Barad (2007), and others, several of whom are feminist scientists. This broad evolving of constructivist theory is often characterized as the material turn. The various critical *turns*—from linguistic to material—are spatial-temporal metaphors that posit theory as a material phenomenon (I think of a skier) navigating a solid surface at a certain speed.

5. My contribution to disability studies has been to provide four critical keywords: "extraordinary," "normate," "the stare," and "freakery" (Garland-Thomson 1996; 1997; 2009). A keyword, a term I borrow from Raymond Williams, is a single word that invokes an entire, complex, critical conversation. Indeed, "normate" and "extraordinary" are no longer mine; they belong to disability studies in general. I see them used often uncited; sometimes I've heard them attributed to other scholars. Like good children, they have successfully separated from their parent and are making mature contributions to the larger world. I hope misfits will answer a critical need as well.

6. See Scully 2008, especially ch. 4.

7. Bynum acknowledges three aspects of identity: individual personality; ascribed or achieved group affiliation; and spatio-temporal integrity, which is the sense of identity upon which she focuses (1999). Her fundamental question is, "How can I be the same person I was a moment ago?"

8. See Garland-Thomson 2009, ch. 4. Sander Gilman describes aesthetic surgery as the quest to be visually anonymous (1998); Erving Goffman describes "civil inattention" as a form of social capital (1980); and William Ian Miller discusses the advantages of being "disattendable" (1997).

9. I have developed a similar argument about the importance of visual interchange and identity formation and social justice in *Staring: How We Look* (Garland-Thomson 2009). Our shared cultural conviction that the truth of identity is visually perceptible comes from modernity's faith in and preference for the material and the visually apprehensible as the ground of knowing. Commonplace affirmations of this conviction abound: "I know it when I see it," "show me," and "plain as the nose on your face."

10. For a detailed discussion of this example, see Shapiro 1993.

11. For discussions of normalcy and standardization of bodies, see Hacking 1990; Canguilhem 1991; and Davis 1995, among many others.

12. Queer theory has similarly challenged the primacy of normal. Both disability and homosexuality are embodiments that have been pathologized by modern medicine. Robert McRuer has theorized this affinity most thoroughly in *Crip Theory* (McRuer 2006), in his useful neologism "Compulsory Ablebodiedness," which alludes to Adrienne Rich's germinal concept of "Compulsory Heterosexuality" (in Rich 1986). Also see Warner 2000.

13. In her 2006 book *Frontiers of Justice*, Martha Nussbaum continues the elaboration of her capabilities approach by considering what might be called significant

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

dependence—the kind characteristic of childhood and disability—to determine the threshold of human capability that produces what she calls "a life worthy of human dignity" (Nussbaum 2006, 70). In my view, capability lodges too firmly in bodies and not enough in environments. What makes the capabilities approach untenable is that judging the worth of a life through quality-of-life arguments has been used to justify eugenic euthanasia, selective abortion, forced sterilization, institutional warehousing, and a variety of other discriminatory practices based on prejudicial attitudes and lack of imagination on the part of dominant majorities who do not understand disabled lives.

14. The feminist ethic of care has been articulated for the last several decades. For the ethics of care in relation to inevitable dependency and disability in particular, see Kittay 1999.

15. Fineman differentiates between inevitable dependence and derivative dependence (Fineman 2008). Inevitable dependence is the universal need for care, the bodily vulnerability that all human beings experience in differing ways and degrees over a lifetime. Derivative dependence is the vulnerable position of those who are actively caring for others in a liberal social order founded on the myth of the autonomous subject.

16. See Habermas 1991 and Arendt 1998 on the political significance of the public sphere.

17. The complex question of the relationship between reproductive freedom and eugenic discrimination is a topic I cannot fully address here but only gesture toward. For fuller discussions, see Saxton 1998; Parens and Asch 2000; and Scully 2008. I have argued for conserving disability as a form of biodiversity in "Welcoming the Unbidden: The Case for Conserving Human Biodiversity" (Garland-Thomson 2005).

18. This is what Maria Lugones calls "world traveling" (1987).

References

Alcoff, Linda Martín. 2000. Who's afraid of identity politics? In *Reclaiming identities: Realist theory and the predicament of the postmodern*, ed. Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García. Berkeley: University of California Press.

———. 2006. *Visible identities: Race, gender, and the self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Arendt, Hannah. 1998. *The human condition*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Barad, Karen Michelle. 2007. *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

———. 2008. Post-humanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. In *Material feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman Indiana University Press.

Barnes, Colin, Len Barton, and Mike Oliver. 2002. *Disability studies today*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Brown, Wendy. 1993. Wounded attachments. *Political Theory* 21 (3): 390–410.

Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York: Routledge.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

———. 2004. *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
Bynum, Caroline Walker. 1999. National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, March 22. Washington, D.C. http://www.neh.gov/news/archive/19990322b.html (accessed February 9, 2011).
Canguilhem, George. 1991. *The normal and the pathological*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
Clare, Eli. 1999. *Exile and pride: Disability, queerness, and liberation*. Cambridge, Mass.: South End Press.
Collins, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
Davis, Lennard J. 1995. *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness, and the body*. London: Verso.
Dubois, W. E. B. 2008. *The souls of black folk*. Radford, Va.: Wilder Publications.
Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 2000. *Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
Fineman, Martha Albertson. 2005. *The autonomy myth: A theory of dependency*. New York: The New Press.
———. 2008. The vulnerable subject: Anchoring equality in the human condition. *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20 (1): 1–23.
Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. 1996. *Freakery: Cultural spectacles of the extraordinary body*. New York: New York University Press.
———. 1997. *Extraordinary bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
———. 1999. Narratives of deviance and delight: Staring at Julia Pastrana. "The Extraordinary Lady." In *Beyond the binary*, ed. T. Powell. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press.
———. 2005. Welcoming the unbidden: The case for conserving human biodiversity. In *What democracy looks like*, ed. A. S. Lang and C. Tichi. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
———. 2009. *Staring: How we look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gilman, Sander. 1998. *Creating beauty to cure the soul: Race and psychology in the shaping of aesthetic surgery*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
Goffman, Erving. 1980. *Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Habermas, Jürgen. 1991. *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
———. 2004. Public space and political public sphere: The biographical roots of two motifs in my thought. Commemorative lecture. Kyoto, Nov. 11. http://homepage.mac.com/gedavis/JH/Kyoto_lecture_Nov_2004.pdf (accessed February 9, 2011).
Hacking, Ian. 1990. *The taming of chance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Haraway, Donna. 2003. *The Haraway reader*. New York: Routledge.
Harding, Sandra. 1986. The instability of the analytical categories of feminist theory. *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society* 11 (4): 645–64.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Keller, Evelyn Fox. 2002. *The century of the gene*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Kittay, Eva Feder. 1999. *Love's labor: Essays on women, equality, and dependency*. New York: Routledge.
Linton, Simi. 1998. *Claiming disability: Knowledge and identity*. New York: New York University Press.
Lugones, Maria. 1987. Playfulness, "world"-traveling, and loving perception. *Hypatia* 2 (2): 3–20.
McRuer, Robert. 2006. *Crip theory*. New York: New York University Press.
Miller, William Ian. 1997. *The anatomy of disgust*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Mitchell, David, and Sharon Snyder. 2006. *Cultural locations of disability*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Mohanty, Satya. 2000. The epistemic status of cultural identity: On *Beloved* and the postcolonial condition. In *Reclaiming identities: Realist theory and the predicament of the postmodern*, ed. Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Moya, Paula. 2000. Postmodernism, "realism," and the politics of identity: Cherríe Moraga and Chicana feminism. In *Reclaiming identities: Realist theory and the predicament of the postmodern*, ed. Paula M. L. Moya and Michael R. Hames-García. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Nussbaum, Martha. 2006. *Frontiers of justice: Disability, nationality, species membership*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
Parens, Erik, and Adrienne Asch. 2000. *Prenatal testing and disability rights*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.
Rich, Adrienne. 1986. Notes toward a politics of location. In *Blood, bread, and poetry: Selected prose 1979–1985*. London: Little Brown and Company.
Rubin, Gayle. 1975. The traffic in women: Notes on the "political economy" of sex. In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter. New York: New York Monthly Review Press.
Sacks, Harvey. 1984. On doing "being ordinary." In *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*, ed. J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Saxton, Marsha. 1998. Disability rights and selective abortion. In *Abortion wars: A half century of struggle (1950–2000)*, ed. Ricky Solinger. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Schweik, Susan. 2009. *The ugly laws*. New York: New York University Press.
Scully, Jackie Leach. 2008. *Disability bioethics: Moral bodies, moral difference*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield.
Shapiro, Joseph. 1993. *No pity: People with disabilities forging a new civil rights movement*. New York: Times Books/Random House.
Siebers, Tobin. 2008. *Disability theory*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press.
Thomas, Carol. 1999. Defining disability: The social model. In *Female forms: Experiencing and understanding disability*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Turner, Bryan S. 2006. *Vulnerability and human rights*. University Park: Penn State University Press.

United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=260 (accessed February 10, 2011).

Warner, Michael. 2000. *The trouble with normal*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Wendell, Susan. 1996. *The rejected body: Feminist philosophical reflections on disability*. New York: Routledge.

Wilson, Elizabeth. 2004. Gut feminism. *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 15 (3): 66–94.

This content downloaded from
97.139.250.65 on Wed, 05 Feb 2025 18:25:05 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms